



Nachni and Rasik: The Unique Evolutionary Relationship in 20th Century

Alhad Chandra Mahato

Research Scholar, Sidho-Kanho-Birsha University, Purulia, West Bengal, India

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Abstract

The Nachni community is a popular folk culture of the Manbhum, Singhbhum and Ranchi districts of eastern India. The word 'Nachni' is used both as a noun and an adjective. 'Nachni' refers to both the artist and the art. The person called 'Rasik' is inextricably linked with the 'Nachni community'. The existence of one without the other is unthinkable. Throughout the twentieth century, a relational evolution has been observed between these Nachni and Rasik communities. The ups and downs of the Rasik Nachni relationship were noted as well. Once upon a time, there was no man-woman relationship that existed between the Nachni and the landlords except the professional way. But later on, a new relationship had been developed which was purely personal by nature. By the end of the 20th century, their relationship reached to the level of a husband and wife. The closer their relationship became, the more and more hatred towards the Nachni community grew in the society. The main purpose of this article is to explore the reasons for this relational evolution of the Nachni and Rasik community.

Keywords: Nachni, Rasik, Community, Relationship, Evolution

Introduction:

The tradition of 'Nachni' in the erstwhile Manbhum and Singhbhum districts, located in the south-western part of Chotonagpur, has been developing over countless generations. Regardless of the evolutionary origins of 'Nachni', this dance has carved out a unique identity within the region. The inhabitants here are both custodians and performers of Nachni nach. The men familiar with the Jhumur song and the lower classes of the 'Rijhe-Range-Sinchita' (mirthful) community, much like any of the Zamindars, acted as patrons of the Nachni – known as 'Rasik'. With resolute determination, they began preserving Nachni within their zamindari, emulating the Baiji custom observed by the Sultans and Kings of earlier times. Just as 'Rasik' does not exist without 'Nachni', 'Nachni' can't be thought of without 'Rasik'. Both complement each other. In this context Sri Radha Gobind Mahato, in his book 'Jharkhander Loksanskriti', writes,

"In this dance, the perspective of the union dance of Radha and Krishna – performed by the Nachni and the Rasik – is revealed, which is why it may be considered the dance of the couple's union. The essence of a couple's dance is also expressed through the gestures of both performers. The Nachnis follow exactly the way the Rasik performs various movements of

his limbs. Although it is briefly called the 'Nachni Nach', in reality, it is a joint, inseparable performance by the Nachni and the Rasik; without one, the other remains incomplete."¹

In the local language, this Rasik is known as 'Rasikya'. It can be said about 'Rasik', all those associated with Nachni nach and group are enthusiastic and entertaining, but the Nachni under whose supervision learn Jhumur songs and dances and become Nachni, is called Rasik. The Nachni is usually the 'Bhogya' (one who enjoys her body) of the Rasik. The concept of Rasik manifested in society in three distinct ways. **First**, among the instrumentalists in the 'dance halls' of the king-landlords, many longed to be entertained by Nachnis. **Second**, those familiar with dance-song-jhumur and Jhumur writer-singers developed an appreciation for Nachni, opening a pathway to experience personal pleasure. **Third**, with the emergence of noble dignity in society, some of the rising rich began to keep 'Baiji- Nachni' as a means of luxury-indulgence.² As a result, moving away from the traditional 'Asar' held in the zamindars' courtrooms, 'Asar' of the Baijis began to be organized in villages, bazaars, and fairs. At this time, a group of people acquainted with dance-jhumur song started keeping 'Bai'—despite having wives, sons, and daughters—to express their noble dignity. Gradually, the social status of 'Bai' changed. Her name was transformed to Nachni, and those who directly participated in the dance with Nachni became known as Rasik.

Evolution of Rasiks:

This evolution of Nachni-Rasik's philosophy has undergone drastic changes today. Kshirod Chandra Mahato wrote in his book '*Manbhumer Nachni and Rasik*',

"A true Rasik is both the protector and caretaker of a Nachni. He does not neglect her as a mere mistress or an object of pleasure; instead, he nurtures her as a worthy companion in his love for dance, music, and Jhumur. Granting her the respect of a wife, he welcomes her into his household as a family member. They have children together, whom he educates and marries off into society. In some cases, the children of a Nachni even inherit the Rasik's movable and immovable properties, securing their rightful place in his lineage."³

In the pre-independence period, two types of Rasiks communities were generally observed. **One-** All those feudal lords, zamindars who love the Nachni nach and patronize the Nachnis. Wherever the dance 'Asar' was held in the royal court or dance hall, the local 'kings-landlords' only enjoyed the pleasure, the Nachnis did not develop any spiritual or physical relationship with them outside of professionalism. **Two-** All those Jhumur singers and composers, who sponsored Nachnis to promote and popularize Jhumur songs as well as make themselves popular. Rasik fulfilled his dream centring Nachnis. They come to the Asar dressed as Rasik with Nachni. Lived together as husband and wife. Keeping the Nachni under his supervision, he trained an uneducated girl into a Nachni by his own hands. Sri Tapan Kar in his book '*Asamanya Manbhumi*' (1994 first edition) says,

"In the patronage of Nachnis, the great kings of Patkum, Shili, Panchakot, and Seraikela played a direct role, just as the smaller landlords, Mankis, and

¹ Mahato, R. (1379 BS), *Jharkhander Lok-Sanskriti*, Pari Bhairab Pustakalay, Kolkata, p. 100.

² Mahato, K.C. (2022), *Manbhumer Nachni O Rasik*, Bangiya Sahitya Samsad, Kolkata, p. 84.

³ Mahato, K.C. (2022), *Manbhumer Nachni O Rasik*, Bangiya Sahitya Samsad, Kolkata, p. 84.

Bhumij chieftains did. In this tradition, the Rasik was the immediate guide and companion of the Nachni, but the patrons and organizers were also a different kind of Rasik. Though they were kings, landlords, or chieftains, they were no less skilled in composing Jhumur verses. In fact, many of them, adorned with turbans, would join the Nachni on stage, matching her steps without hesitation.”⁴

There were many zamindars of Manbhum, feudal lords and kings who consistently patronized Nachnis to maintain the tradition and many zamindar clans, went down to the road for maintenance. From the time of Raja Jyotiprasad (1892-1938) of Kashipur, Nachni nach continued to be prominent in the royal palace. Sindhulala Devi, Kamala Jhariya used to dance during the time of Shankariprasad Singha Deo. Sometimes Shankarprasad son of Raja Jyotiprasad, would send a car to fetch Sindhulala. He used to play Pakhwaz himself in ‘Asar’. He used to address Sindhulala as ‘Chepi Bai’. Two generation Sindhulala had danced for in Kashipur Rajbari. During Raja Bhubaneswari Prasad, Chapla a Nachni, Satapur, Urmila a Nachni Helagarh used to sing and dance in Rajbari. He used to play *madol*, *dhol*, *nagara*, string instruments together with Nachni. The kings of Kashipur not only patronized Baijis and Nachnis but were themselves connoisseurs of dance and song. In this context, Ashok Sarkar in ‘*Bhinnachokhe*’ newspaper wrote in 1394,

“The royal family of Panchakot was not just patrons of music; they were also great connoisseurs of the art. Among them, Maharaja Jyotiprasad and Rajendralal Singdeo stood out. Jyotiprasad was not only an admirer of music but also a distinguished artist of the Surbahar. Similarly, Rajendralal Singdeo was not just a Dhrupadi singer but also an accomplished Pakhawaj player.”⁵

The Zamindar of Baghmundi also patronized Nachni and Nachni Nach. An aspect of the patronage of Nachnis by kings is mentioned by Somnath Chakraborty in his book ‘Nati’. He writes,

“.....From Ayodhya Prasad Singh, the first male king of the Baghmundi family of Purulia, to the time of the eighteenth male king Kshetramohan, all the kings have continuously patronized Jhumur song and Nachni nach. During the reign of the last king Madanmohan Sinhadev, the Nachnis settled in the house of the ‘Naya’ in the ‘Chauhaddi’(area) of the palace. Naya was tribal ‘Kul’ priest. Bhikshadar Singh Naya was a Rasik during the reign of Raja Kshetramohan. Bhikshadar trained the Nachnis of King. Rehearsal goes along with the song. The search for new Nachnis is also going on.”⁶

Sindhulala said in her interview – Zamindar Suchand Singh of Bagmundi used to have three-four ‘Nachnis’.⁷ prestige. Yet, it was these very individuals who harboured a genuine love for dance and music.

There are also instances in Manbhum where, despite being zamindars, some individuals gradually lost everything due to their deep attachment to Nachni-Jhumur and ultimately

⁴ Kar, T. (1994), *Asamanya Manbhum*, Kolkata, Ananda Publishers, p. 84.

⁵ Dasgupta, D. (ed.), (1394 BS), *Bhinnachokhe Patrika*, Bishesh Sankhya, p. 52.

⁶ Mallik, S. K. (2003), *Nachni: Arthasamajik Prekshite*, Unpublished Thesis, p. 54.

⁷ Mallik, S. K. (2003), *Nachni: Arthasamajik Prekshite*, Unpublished Thesis, p. 55.

lived solely as Rasiks. Son of landlord Dwarikanath Ganguly, Ramakrishna Ganguly composed and sang Jhumur songs. Nimaikrishna Mahato writes in his book '*Manbhumi Nachni Sanskriti*', "He had a total of sixteen Nachnis."⁸ Among them 'Big Four' (Char Pradhan) Nachnis were namely- Subhadra, Padma, Mani and Bela. He made Subhadra, daughter of Dahu Ghasi of Chamda village, his main Nachni.

"He had to face many hurdles to keep Nachni. When Subhadra was collected from Chamda, a scuffle ensued with the 'Goyala's. Ramakrishna did not accept social conscience for the case of an artist."⁹

As a consequence of keeping this Nachni, the Rasik had not to pay less in life. The life of Ramakrishna Ganguly, the Rasik of Nachni, is a shining example of this. In the Shardia issue of 1381 B.S. of '*Chhattrak Patrika*', it is written, He faced many obstacles in keeping a Nachni as well. When he brought Subhadra from Chamda, a violent confrontation nearly broke out with the Gowalas (cowherds). In matters of art, Ramkrishna did not concern himself with societal morality."¹⁰ Centring 'Nachni' Subhadra, the most tragic event in Ramakrishna's life was the suicide of his son Perimohan. Bhuthanath Kundu writes, "..... after getting antahpurcharini, the stewardship of the family also fell into the hands of Subhadra. But Perimohan could never tolerate this. A scorpion of jealousy was stinging in his heart and this burning was relieved by his suicide."¹¹

There was no escape, no way to erase its trace. Even after this tragic incident, Ramakrishna did not abandon Sadhan Sangini Subhadra but consoled himself by calling it 'The Writing of Vidhi.' Thus, it can be said that just as the Nachnis were willing to embrace their fate hand in hand with the Rasik, the Rasik too sacrificed their social status and wealth for the sake of Nachni. Nachni, in turn, made both social and material sacrifices to preserve the dance tradition.

Rasiks in the post-Independence Era:

Two types of Rasiks are generally observed during this period in the life of a Nachni. One: A good-natured Rasik. Two bad natured Rasik. Good natured Rasik's are those who have a sense of Rasik in their minds. In whose heart and blood Jhumur stream flows. Those who love this art and artist have taken up Nachni. Subrata Mukhopadhyay wrote in his novel 'Rasik'-

"Sujan Rasik Zaaraa
Premer Maram Jaane Taara Hye."¹²

Translated in English-

Rasiks of good character
understand the essence of love.

To all these Rasiks the importance of Nachni is lifelong. They never abandoned Nachni. They stayed together defying all the adverse conditions of the society, insults, deprivation, condemnation. Some have left the society for the sake of Nachni and others have left the family for the sake of the society. Subrata Mukhopadhyay wrote in his novel 'Rasik',

⁸ Mahato, N. (2022), *Manbhumer Nachni Sanskriti*, Kabitika, Kolkata, p. 39.

⁹ Basuroy, S. (ed.), (1381 BS), *Chhattrak Patrika*, Sharadiya Sankhya, pp. 130-131.

¹⁰ Basuroy, S. (ed.), (1381 BS), *Chhattrak Patrika*, Sharadiya Sankhya, pp. 130-131

¹¹ Basuroy, S. (ed.), (1381 BS), *Chhattrak Patrika*, Sharadiya Sankhya, pp. 130-131.

¹² Subrata Mukhopadhyay, S. (1991), *Rasik*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, p. 17.

"Rasik is 'Nagar Kala' (God Krishna) and Nachni is his beloved Radharani, ever companion of Rasik."¹³

Lalon award winner Manbhum famous Nachni artist Pastubala Devi's 'Rasik' is Vijay Karmakar. From a very early age he had a sincere attraction to Jhumur songs and Nachni Nach. This addiction to Jhumur songs made him the Rasik of Nachni. Despite having a wife and son in family life, he brought Pastubala to his house as Nachni. After the arrival of Pastubala, Vijay Karmakar's family continued to be in turmoil. Nimaikrishna Mahato writes,

"Nachniye Ghare Sthan Deoya Zabe Na. Nachnir Haate Khaabar Khele Samaje Paate Nebe Na."¹⁴

Translated in English: Nachni cannot be given a place in the house. One will not be accepted in the society if the food is made by the hand of Nachni.) He had to endure many insults and condemnations in his own house for Pastubala. He even had to go to jail on his wife's objection. However, Rasik Vijay Karmakar did not abandon Pastubala but he himself left the house with Pastubala for the peace of the family. Vijay Karmakar never left his family even though he left the house. He used to send some of his earnings every month for the family. Nimaikrishna Mahato also writes in his book '*Nachni Sanskriti of Manbhum*',

"Rasik Vijay took Pastubala to perform dances at Baguiati, Sealdha Kaivarta Samiti, Shishir Manch, Madhusudan Manch, Thakurbari in Jorasanko etc in Calcutta."¹⁵

Now she is the present Secretary of 'Manbhum Lok Sanskriti and Nachni Unnayan Samiti' (MLSNUS), own organization of Nachnis. Nachni artist Pastubala Devi would not have achieved such respect if Rasik like Vijay Karmakar had not appeared in her life. This incident in Vijay Karmakar's life proves that Nachni was not his life's hobby, but an undying love for 'Nachni' or 'Nachni Nach'. So, role of Rasik Vijay Karmakar i.e. this genuine love of one artist for another will be remembered forever by Manbhum folk culture lovers.

Shraban Kalindi is the Rasik of Purulia's popular 'Dhumri Nachni' Charubala. He brought her home. After taking her home naturally Sharaban's married wife could not accept Charubala. Rasik Sharaban Kalindi's Nachni Charubala and his married wife quarrelled continue. Once Sharaban also became against her wife. However, the Rasik Shravan Kalindi did not reject Charubala. According to Charubala, not only in Purulia, but wherever she went outside Purulia, Rasik went with her to do the programme. They also had a daughter; she got married and had a child. She said in the interview that,

"As a Nachni, I never experienced any mistreatment from Rasik. Likewise, I never considered him an outsider—I always saw him as my husband. Even after leaving dance and music behind, I am very happy. Now, society has also accepted me. I visit Rasik's relatives' homes just like the wives from respectable families do. All of this has been possible because of my Rasik. If

¹³Subrata Mukhopadhyay, S. (1991), *Rasik*, Ananda Publishers, Calcutta, p. 17.

¹⁴ Mahato, N. (2022), *Manbhumer Nachni Sanskriti*, Kharagpur, Midnapur, W.B.: Kabitika, p. 46.

¹⁵ Mahato, N. (2022), *Manbhumer Nachni Sanskriti*, Kharagpur, Midnapur, W.B.: Kabitika, p. 46.

I were to have a Rasik like him again, I would gladly become a Nachni once more.”¹⁶

Charubala's statement shows how their relationship was or still is. Sharaban Kalindi's treatment of Charubala as a Rasik makes him a 'Good Nature Rasik'. And this is possible in his case because he loves not only Nachni but also Nachni culture from his heart.

Bad Rasiks are those who have nothing to do with jhumur songs at heart. They kept Nachni only for the satisfaction of their mind and also as a means of earning. This type of Rasik has a relationship with Nachni as long as remains the beauty and youth of Nachnis. Then they have no place with the Rasik. Like Harendranath Pramanik, a primary school teacher, kept Chaina Devi as a Nachni. Nachni Chaina says that Harendranath brought her home under the pretense of love. When China arrived at his house, she discovered that he already had a married wife, leaving her in a difficult situation—having left her father's home, she would not be welcomed back there. When Chaina Devi asked Harendranath Pramanik about marriage, he replied that if she wanted to remain in his house, she would have to be a Nachni. In this situation, even if she did not wish to, she was forced into choosing the path of Nachni. However, as she grew older and her appearance diminished, the bookings for dance performances decreased, and her earnings declined. Despite having a daughter, Rasik began contemplating leaving her, and conflicts between them became frequent. Ultimately, one day, he kicked China out of his house.

The ups and downs of the Rashik Nachni relationship were noted as well. Once upon a time, there was no man woman relationship that existed between the Nachni and the landlords except the professional way. But later on, a new relationship had been developed which was purely personal by nature. By the end of the 20th century, their relationship reached to the level of a husband and wife. The closer their relationship became, the more and more hatred towards the Nachni sect grew in the society. Because at this time there appeared a class of Rasiks and Nachnis who have had questionable debauched characters.

After India got its independence in 1947, India underwent a huge political change. India witnessed a totally different legal system from that of the colonial rule. Zamindari system got abolished. As a result, they became financially weak which affected their grandiose lifestyle. Old Zamindars of Ranchi, Singhbhum and Manbhum district became financially weak to patronize the Nachnis. Under this circumstances Nachnis became helpless. Men of Ordinary birth, came forward in rescue of these Nachnis. 'Rijhe- Ronge-Sinchito', in spite of being family man, they used to enjoy the company of the Nauch girls and highly appreciated the jhumur dance form. At that time, the dynamics between Rasiks and Nachnis also changed. Previously, the relationship between the Zamindar and the Nachnis used to be as the teacher and the disciple. They did not have a conjugal relationship. But in the latter half of Twentieth century, the dynamics of their relationship changed, Nachnis became concubine to their Rasiks. They started to live like Husband and wife, despite the Rasik having another wife. Although the children born out of such relationship were illegitimate in the eyes of the society. These children were also prohibited to enter the premises of any programme of the society.

The relationship between Nachni and Rasik became stronger in the last decade of the twentieth century. Unmarried men also came forward to patronize the Nachnis. Nachnis became the real and only wife of the Rasik. A few of them became Rasik despite being

¹⁶ Interview, *Charubala Kalindi*, Vill. - Senabana, P.S.- Arsha, Dist.- Purulia, Date- 05/11/2022.

married, but gave proper respect of a wife. Despite them being husband and wife, society looked down upon their relationship. Because Two types of Nachnis and Rasiks emerged during the second half of Twentieth century -1. **Virtuous Rasiks, 2. Wicked Rasiks.** Good character Rasiks were those who patronised Nachnis without considering their financial gain. At certain cases they isolated from the society. Bimala's Rasik, Parvati's Rasik, Falguni Mahato, Charubala's Rasik Shraban Kalindi from Manbhum, Butan Devi's Rasik Lakshmi Kanta Mura from Ranchi district and Malabati's Rasik Bauri Bondhu Mahato from Singhbhum district, are a few examples. But there are few Rasiks, labelled as 'Bad Character Rasiks' because as soon as their Nachnis turned old, incapable of earning money, they used to abandon them as those Nachnis are not serving them any fortune. These bad character Rasiks would not even consider his own children born with the Nachni before abandoning them. Harendra Nath Pramanik, who was a school teacher, Rasik of Chaina Debi, is one such example. Under such horrendous circumstances, Nachnis used to take different ways to sustain. Like these Wicked Rasiks (Bad character Rasiks), there are also a few Bad Character Nachnis, who used to change their Rasiks frequently. Nachni Sandhya Debi of Ulda village, Manbhum district, is one such example, who has changed four Rasiks. Despite having children with her first Rasik, Kajla Debi from Shreerampure, has also changed her Rasik. Because of such evil character Rasiks and Nachnis, people started to look at their entire community with disgrace.

Finally, it has to be said that A true Rasik is the protector and guardian of a Nachni. That Rasik never neglects his Nachni as a 'Rakshita'. He never thinks of Nachni as a means of pleasure. Rather, Rasik makes Nachni a worthy companion for the love of dance-jhumur song. In the course of evolution, the relationship between Nachni and Rasik changes. Rasik accepts Nachni as a member of his family with the status of his wife. Their children are married off after education. Even the children of the Nachni inherit the movable and immovable property of the Rasik.¹⁷

In this context, the son of Bimala Devi of Satra village, the son of Parvati Devi of Mathari village can be mentioned. Both the Rasik and the Nachni performed daily family activities as well as happy married life and continued singing and dancing. For example, Maheshwar Mahato (Chepa Mahato) and Sindubala Devi of Kendri village of Arsha police station, Nibaran Mahato and Geeta Rani Devi of Majhihira village of Manbazar police station, Rasik Atul Mahato and his Nachni of Goalpara village, Kartik Tantubaya and Rajbala of Jugidi village in Purulia, Raghunandan Kumar and Bimal Devi of Satra village in Purulia district, Madhu Kuiri and Chintamani Kuiri of Noyadi village of Baghmundi Thana are very successful in the lives of Nachnis as Rasiks. This Nachni and Rasik duet dance-song renditions have earned them a place in the hearts of the people of the region. They acknowledged the gratitude of Rasik for their successful lives. And as a Nachni, they also considered themselves blessed. Nishith Chakraborty wrote in his book 'Nachni',

"Nachnirao Tader Rasiker Kalyane Maathay Sindur Chaday. Tader Mritute Boidhaba Paalan Kare."¹⁸

Translated in English: Nachnis, too, wear sindur on their foreheads as a mark of their bond with their Rasik. Upon their Rasik's death, they observe widowhood in mourning.) Some of Nachnis who are alive, or have come to the end of life, did not feel any regret for

¹⁷ Mahato, K. C. (2022), *Manbumer Nachni O Rasik*, Kolkata, Bangiya Sahitya Samsad, p. 87.

¹⁸ Chakrabarti, N. (2004), *Nachni*: Kolkata, Sagnik, p. 25.

all these Rasiks, rather they were grateful. They admit that if they had not come to this profession with the help of Rasik then they would have been deprived of many reputations and honours in life. According to Nishith Chakraborty,

“Rasik Sarbakshetrei Guru Hisebe Nachnir Naachke Manusher Kachhe
Bada Kare Tulechhe. Taai se Ekadhare Nachnir Ostad O Rakshak. Rasik Ba
Raikya Aabhidhanik arthake Chadiye Bishesh Arthe Mahimamay Kare
Tole Nachnike.”¹⁹

Translated in English: The Rasik, in every sense, has elevated the Nachni’s dance in the eyes of the people as a true art form. Thus, he is both the Nachni’s mentor and protector. Beyond its literal meaning, the term ‘Rasik’ or ‘Raikya’ takes on a profound significance, glorifying the Nachni and her craft.

¹⁹ Chakrabarti, N. (2004), *Nachni*: Kolkata, Sagnik, p. 25.